



## Footnote to the History of Riefenstahl's 'Olympia'

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clusion to be drawn is that sheer visual correspondence can be as meaningless in film as in life). But then should Eisenstein's three lions be scattered rather than juxtaposed, as they are, in sequence to give the illusion of a single lion springing to its feet? No. Because the symbolic message—the People's spirit awakening—is (a) otherwise impossible to suggest in terms of the lion image, and (b) left to us to deduce. But in Roeg's case, we seem to be having some kind of coded message thrown at us, though actually there is none except what our own fancy can

superimpose.

If the essence of film is that what we see is whatever has been cut into the frame (and what we don't see has been, just as consciously, excluded from the frame), then a delicate balance must be kept between surprise and expectation. And by this criterion, too, *Don't Look Now* fails, over-weighted as it is toward surprise. The best films walk the tightrope: *Rules of the Game*, *L'Avventura*, *Vertigo*, *The Fire Within*, *Four Bags Full*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. Each unpredictable from shot to shot, yet inevitable.

**HANS BARKHAUSEN**

## Footnote to the History of Riefenstahl's 'Olympia'

Leni Riefenstahl has maintained that her two 1936 Olympics films, *Fest der Völker* and *Fest der Schönheit*, were produced by her own company, commissioned by the organizing committee of the International Olympic Committee, and made over the protest of Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. In "Olympia, the Film of the Eleventh Olympic Games in Berlin, 1936," a paper written to defend herself in 1958, she says: "The truth is that neither the Ministry of Propaganda nor other National Socialist party or government bodies had any influence on the Olympic Games or on the production or design of the Olympia films."

The voluminous documentary material of the former Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment and the materials of the former Reich Ministry of Finances, today deposited in the Federal Archives in Koblenz (the central depository of the Federal Republic of Germany) tell a different story.

These records show that the two Olympia films were financed by the Nazi government, that the Olympia Film Company was founded by that government, that the government made money by distributing the films through the

Tobis-Filmkunst Company, and that the government, finally, ordered the liquidation of the Olympia Film Company, in which Leni Riefenstahl and her brother were partners.

The true story of the origin of the two Olympics films of 1936 begins with a short memo written in the Reich Finance Ministry on October 16, 1935, saying: "On the order of Herr Minister Goebbels, Ministerial Counselor Ott, on October 15, proposed the following special appropriations to me: (1) for promotion of the Olympic Games: RM 300–350,000; (2) for the Olympic film: RM 1,500,000."

Ministerial Counselor Ott was the budget expert in the Propaganda Ministry, much respected, and rather liberal by the standards of the times. A carbon of the memo was sent to him by the Finance Ministry, and he initialed it on October 17, 1935. The words "to me" evidently refer to the section chief in charge in the Finance Ministry; his name in the note is recorded only by his initial "M."

The memo continues, with reference to point (2), that is, the Olympic film:

"The Ministry of Propaganda submits the draft of a contract for the production of a film of the

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Olympics, according to which Miss Leni Riefenstahl is commissioned to produce a film of the summer Olympics. The cost is budgeted at RM 1,500,000.

"I have pointed out that this film is certain to bring revenue, so that there would be no difficulty in financing the costs by private enterprise, for example by the Film-Kredit-Bank. This method would avoid government financing. But Ministerial Counselor Ott replied that Herr Minister Goebbels requests the prefinancing with *government* funds.

"According to information from Ministerial Counselor Ott, Herr Minister Goebbels will request the proposed funds in the cabinet meeting of October 18, 1935." [Emphasis in the original.]

This is what actually happened.

In the contract mentioned in the memo Leni Riefenstahl is commissioned to produce and direct the film of the Olympics. The contract repeats the costs of RM 1,500,000. This amount was to be disbursed in four installments:

RM 300,000 on November 15, 1935

RM 700,000 on April 1, 1936

RM 200,000 on November 1, 1936

RM 300,000 on January 1, 1937.

We shall soon see that these amounts were not enough to produce the film.

Section 3 of the contract with Riefenstahl says:

"From the amount of RM 1,500,000 Miss Riefenstahl is to receive RM 250,000 for her work, which is to cover expenses for travel, automobile, and social affairs." The contract stipulated—and this turned out to be an important provision—that Leni Riefenstahl was "to account to the Reich Ministry for Propaganda and Enlightenment for the disbursement of the RM 1,500,000 by presenting receipts." The contract specifically reconfirms that "she is solely responsible for the general artistic direction and overall organization of the Olympic film."

In her 1958 defense paper she writes: "On higher orders (Dr. Goebbels), the German news cameramen, who were the most important elements in the making of documentary pictures, were removed from Leni Riefenstahl's control."

Section 6 of the contract says:

"The Reich Ministry for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment undertakes (as previously in the production of the Reich Party Day film *Triumph des Willens*) to place the German



*Riefenstahl in 1952, in Milan to set up a winter sports film.*

weekly news shows [*Wochenschaufen*] of the Ufa, Fox, and Tobis at the disposal of Miss Riefenstahl and to obligate them to make accessible the material filmed by them for the Olympia film."

The amounts that Riefenstahl was to pay for this material were spelled out by the Propaganda Ministry.

I presume the *Wochenschau* companies were not enthusiastic about having their cameramen take orders from Riefenstahl. But *Wochenschau* material was in fact delivered to her, as shown by the "Itemized List for Herr Minister, April 1937." It states all costs incurred until then for the Olympia film, with a total of RM 1,509,-178.09, which includes as item 11: "Raw film and *Wochenschau* material: RM 220,-003.41." Whether Riefenstahl actually used this material in her film is a different question. But in her distribution contract with Tobis this possibility is specifically spelled out for legal reasons.

In her postwar interviews Riefenstahl consistently referred to "her own company" that produced the Olympia film. In her 1958 defense paper she also says: "Goebbels did not want Leni Riefenstahl to show the victorious black athletes in the Olympia film. When L. R. refused to comply with these requests and did not honor them later either, Goebbels ordered the Film-Kredit-Bank, which was answerable to his Ministry, to refuse all further credits to the Olympia-Film Company (a private firm)." The parenthesis is in the original. These statements, however, are products of Leni Riefenstahl's imagination. What are the facts?

When a film company was funded, it was general practice to deposit in a court of law an initial capital of RM 50,000, after entering the firm in the official Trade Register. The funds for the founding of the Olympia Film Company were provided by the Reich government. But the Reich, in this case, was parsimonious. Hence Ministerial Counselor Ott, on January 30, 1936, wrote to the Berlin-Charlottenburg Court: "The Olympia Film Company is being set up at the request of the government and financed by funds supplied by the government. The means needed by the company to produce the film are likewise supplied exclusively by the government. The company has had to be established because the government does not wish to appear publicly as the producer of this film. It is planned to liquidate the company when the production of the film is concluded."

Evidently this was still not spelled out with sufficient clarity for the Court. Therefore the Reich Film Chamber, the body responsible for the founding of film companies, wrote to the Court on February 12, 1936: "We are not talking, then, about a private enterprise, or about an enterprise with ordinary commercial aims, but about a company founded exclusively for the purpose of external organization and production of the said film. It appears unwise [*untunlich*] for the government itself to appear as the producer." Hence Leni Riefenstahl's fictitious company was required to pay no more than RM 20,000 as original capital, from the funds provided by the government. Still, the Examination

Board of the Propaganda Ministry complained on October 16, 1936, that "the original capital has not been paid in up to now."

The report of the General Accounting Office which contains these words was an embarrassment for Riefenstahl which she never got over. It was probably one reason why she hated the Propaganda Ministry. Hence I will have to discuss that report further.

The auditors of the GAO, like those of any official agency, even in the Third Reich, were petty bureaucrats. The GAO had tackled audits for other agencies of the government, but presumably it had never dealt with a film production, and certainly never had to deal with such a temperamental and self-assured film artist as Riefenstahl. The auditors however chose to treat her strictly as the manager of the Olympia Film Company.

The auditors complain that as early as September 16, 1936, of the government-agreed RM 1,500,000 "RM 1,200,000 were requested by the Company and paid out, although by that time only RM 1,000,000 were due." They complain further that "the use of these funds contradicts the order concerning government economies to administer official funds economically and carefully." They add that there were no economies "in general expenses such as per diem payments, tips, meals, drinks, charges, and special charges." "Rarely," they say, "was there a meeting in which the company did not pay for breakfast, lunch, or dinner." The auditors take issue with the fact that the Geyer Works, where Riefenstahl edited the Olympia film and had it printed, on the occasion of its business anniversary was presented with two flower baskets and a gift, valued together at RM 117; that the firm paid RM 202.40 for a business course attended by Leni Riefenstahl's secretary; that RM 10.17 was paid without specification for the "Reich Race Research Office"; that "Miss Riefenstahl and her business manager Grosskopf were reimbursed RM 18 and 15.75 for lost fountain pens." It goes on in this way for pages—thousands of bills or receipts were examined, and where the auditors saw fit were commented on. A few passages read like comedy: those admin-

istering money are chided by the sentence: "The company has no strongbox." Business manager Grosskopf, being responsible for the safety of the cash, "was obliged to take the money home with him" and during the examination on October 3, 1936, "had produced RM 14,000 to 15,000 in various amounts from different pockets of his clothing." The outraged auditors state: "Such practices are verboten."

Incidentally, I happen to know Grosskopf and met him on occasion during the months when the Olympia film was in production. He was a solid, conscientious older businessman, visibly bothered by a situation that was beyond his control.

Goebbels treated this report, presented to him by Ministerial Counselor Hanke, chief of the Ministerial Secretariat (later Gauleiter in Breslau), far more generously than Riefenstahl will allow today. With a green pencil he wrote across the report "Let's not be petty" and ordered Hanke to talk with Riefenstahl. However, when Ministerial Counselor Ott presented Goebbels with an additional request for RM 500,000 because the RM 1,500,000 "presumably will not be sufficient," he wrote: "RM 500,000 are out of the question." But one can sense that this phrasing left the door open. At any rate, he approved an additional RM 300,000.

He refused Ott's suggestion "to include the Film-Kredit-Bank in the future, because it can factually check on the expenditures of the Olympia Film Company," but shrewd Ott has added to his suggestion: "One will have to assume, of course, that Miss Riefenstahl will fight such an order with all means at her disposal." Besides, observes Ott, "it could be undesirable for a private firm, such as the Film-Kredit-Bank, to have intimate information about a company entirely set up by the government." He suggests that perhaps the Reich Film Chamber should do the auditing.

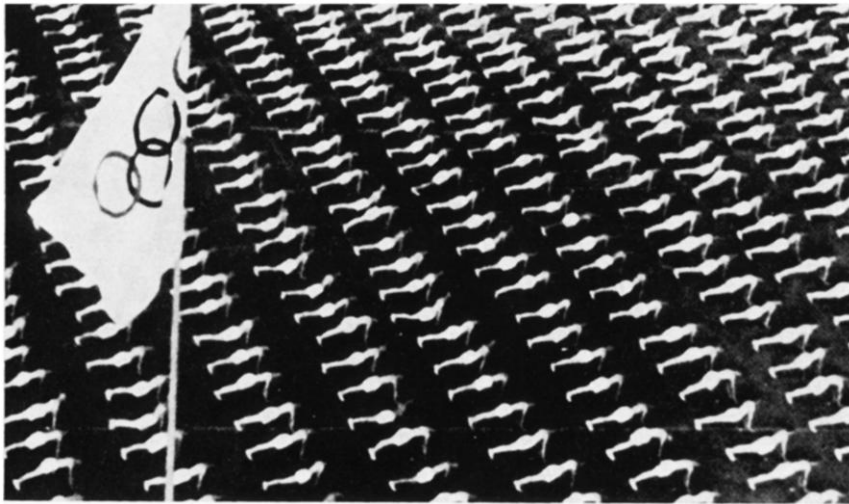
It was undoubtedly disconcerting for Riefenstahl to have to answer the various criticisms of the auditors. Her annoyance was understandable; but there was a second reason to be annoyed. Goebbels ordered the Reich Film Chamber to make available "Judge Pfennig of

the Reich Film Chamber as advisor to the Olympia Film Company." He was to ensure the "purposeful and economic use of the means of this company." The Reich Chamber, on its part, was to report to him, Goebbels, "about Judge Pfennig's activities and observations." Goebbels signed this order with his own hand.

Pfennig was the Legal Counsel of the Reich Film Chamber. Earlier he had worked for the major German film producing company, the Ufa. After Hugenberg in 1927 had taken over the Ufa and had appointed the Director General of the Sherl Publishing Company, Ludwig Klitzsch, as Director General of Ufa, economy was demonstrably practiced. As early as April 1927 Klitzsch appointed Pfennig, then a law clerk, as director of his secretariat and informed the Board of Directors accordingly. (Ufa, Board of Directors protocol No. 18, April 28, 1927). Klitzsch, however, could economize only as long as Goebbels would let him. But after about 1937 Goebbels increasingly prevented economy. It must have been Leni Riefenstahl's second great grief to have Judge Pfennig appointed to supervise her, even though disguised as observer.

In her paper of 1958 Riefenstahl says that she concluded a distribution contract with Tobis, but this tells little about the ownership of the Olympia Film Company. A government-owned company needed a distribution contract just as much as a privately owned one. The contract, concluded December 4, 1936, between Olympia Film Company, represented by Leni Riefenstahl, and Tobis-Cinema Company, represented by production chief Fritz Mainz, specifically points out that the production costs will be about RM 1,500,000. Tobis agreed to a guarantee for RM 800,000 for the first part and at least RM 200,000 for the second part of the film. What this contract did not mention, however, was the obligation by Tobis to account not only to Olympia Film Company but also to the Ministry of Propaganda. This was duly done, however; one copy of the accounting went to Olympia Film Company and two copies to the Ministry of Propaganda, one of which was routed to Ministerial Counselor Ott.

It took Leni Riefenstahl eighteen months to



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complete the two films, a period of time envisioned by the contract with Tobis. The premiere took place on April 20, 1938, Hitler's 49th birthday, at Ufa Palace at the Zoo in Berlin in festive surroundings. There was no indication of a rift between Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl, such as she has talked and written about.

As early as September 26, 1938, Ministerial Counselor Ott was able to report to the Ministry of finance that "a million Reichsmark of unplanned revenue have flowed into the coffers of the Reich treasury."

At that time the *Rechnungshof* (General Accounting Office) remembered that the understanding had been to liquidate the Olympia Film Company on the completion of its task. On November 5, 1938, the agency inquired of the Reich Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment "when the liquidation of the Olympia Film Company is to be expected." On November 21 the reply came, saying that "according to present developments the end of business is to be expected in fiscal year 1939."

Barely six months later, on May 17, 1940, that is after the start of the war, the Propaganda Ministry was able to report to the Reich Finance Ministry that the RM 1,800,000, "needed for the production of the Olympia films and advanced by the government, had been repaid in full to the Reich." The liquidation of the Olympia Film Company, the report added, had been decided in a company meeting on December 6, 1939, to be effective December 31; the liquidation was to be carried out by business manager

Grosskopf. Future revenues from the film would "as up to now be paid into a holding account of the Reich Treasury."

The liquidation process, in fact, took two more years. In the middle of Hitler and Goebbels' "total war," the tireless Ministerial Counselor Ott, still in the same position at the Propaganda Ministry (remarkable in view of the frequent changes in other departments of the agency), on February 1, 1943, reported to the Reich Finance Ministry that "the liquidation of the Olympia Film Company has been completed." According to the accounting submitted "the total net gain transferred to the Reich amounted to RM 114,066.45."

When a king dies another must be immediately proclaimed; hence the final paragraph states: "The further utilization and administration of the two films of the Olympics have been transferred to the *Riefenstahl Film Company* [my emphasis], which will report quarterly about the financial status." No inking, indeed, of hostility between Propaganda Ministry and Riefenstahl.

Thanks to Adolf Hitler the German Reich has ceased to exist, but Leni Riefenstahl is still permitted to exploit her two Olympia films of 1936/1938. She does so now on the basis of a thirty-year contract concluded ten years ago between her and the Transit Film Company, which administers the film rights of the German Federal Republic. Of course, from time to time, she has to settle accounts.